

INTERVIEW WITH MARIA NEPOMUCENO IN STOCKHOLM JANUARY 2010
BY ELISABETH MILLQVIST

EM Tell me about the works in the show, what do they deal with?

MN My work is a mantra, it always repeats the same questions and I always find new meanings. I'm exploring ideas I have been dealing with since 2005 working with rope and necklaces – most recently at a show I had in Rio de Janeiro at the gallery *A Gentil Carioca* in 2009.

EM You describe the materials as the main principle of your work. What interests you in them, what do they invoke for you?

MN Of all my experiences, it was pregnancy that determined the choice of the rope as a vital semantic force for the construction. The rope has an inherent poetical kinship with the umbilical cord.

EM How do you relate to the necklaces, the other material you repeatedly work with?

MN The necklaces (arranged spheres) emerge in the work as one more element related to the human body and nature. They offer me the possibility to construct volumes and start, not only from the line, but also from the point. Points of color can be penetrated and are fertile spheres that multiply themselves infinitely.

EM The kind of rope you use is often nylon rope used for climbing or rope made of hemp, rough material.

MN Yes. I like the rope as an everyday material. It is resistant, very strong. It supports and connects many things. To me it also has an antagonistic meaning. By contrast the necklace is delicate, it evokes the masculine and the feminine.

EM That juxtaposition can also be found in the shapes that I find very intriguing. The sculptures could be described as abstract and at the same time they are recognizably biomorphic, sometimes unmistakably phallic. Could you tell me more about the shape?

MN It is essential that the sculptures express the organic forms present in nature. I construct volumes (and empty spaces), beginning from the line, always in a spiral, a movement which is suggested by the material itself. The circular movement of nature transforms itself into cycles assuming various forms such as that of the body of the universe, from macro- to microorganisms that suggest and express feelings.

EM I know you don't work from specific images but sometimes when it is possible to relate to the body the sculptures become more masculine and vice versa. Are they always both?

MN Yes, they are never only one thing. In each sculpture I always work with complementary forces. In the same way they are a big mix between the body and the landscape.

The look is defined during the working process. I don't like to classify them – sometimes I just call them organisms.

EM The title of the exhibition in Stockholm "Always in a Spiral" derived from how you described the working process and how the material always takes the form of a spiral. When you describe the shape you often use verbs and talk more about movement (flux and retention). Movement is important to you.

MN Yes, I also relate to the rope as an organic filament, a link between the relations of the present, the past and the future. In this relation there is already a movement present. Furthermore the works made in the studio are constantly unmade, torn apart and incorporated into other works. The old material is synchronized with the new and like in nature the sculptures are in a process of constant transformation. I regard the process as an important aspect in my work.

EM We have talked about artistic references and you named the sculptor Alexander Calder (1898–1976) as important. What is it about his work that interests you?

MN The movement! Also how the surrounding conditions affect the movement and create a relation between the work and the environment.

EM Ok, let's continue on this subject of movement. I know that it is also an aspect of great importance for you when you work with the hammock as an object. Four of the works in the exhibition are hammocks, very elaborate constructions consisting of patches of rope and pearls that you have combined and attached to one another making one large piece with a rope in each end in order to suspend it in the traditional way we expect from this object.

MN The hammock is very important in Indian culture. I believe you refer to that it was incorporated into the work not only because of its vital importance in the original Latin American culture with its multiple functions for sleeping, for giving birth and for dying – but also because of the movement of the pendulum. It creates a kind of regressive trance that transports us, bit by bit, to the inside of the ancestral uterus.

EM The direct translation of the Portuguese word for hammock "rede de dormir" is net for sleeping which really stresses those functions while the Swedish word "hängmatta" just describes the object, "hanging rug". The Portuguese word points out how the hammock can be used. In the exhibition there are four hammocks does the number have a meaning?

MN Each one represents the four central functions, the verbs Birth, Live, Love, Die in different constructions: Live, Love, Die, Birth/ Love, Die, Birth, Live/Die, Birth, Live, Love. They could all be replaced for one another as an infinite repetition.

EM You mention repetition, your work has an obsessive quality. There is so much labor in an almost rhythmic process putting the specific beads on the string with the specific

color and size you have chosen, sewing the ropes together to large entities. The curator and critic Robert Storr writes in an essay on Louise Bourgeois' work, "psychologically speaking this process is a kind of sculptural knitting, an obsessive, repetitive and ultimately quieting activity...".

MN In my work I think it is a balance between relaxed forms and hard work (both physically demanding and the repeated action). It is tension and relaxation. More than obsessive it is a meditative practice that can be found within the monotonous.

EM Speaking about Bourgeois I know you feel strongly for her work. She shares your fascination with the spiral and in an interview she is quoted as saying:

"The spiral is important to me. It is a twist. As a child, after washing the tapestries in the river, I would turn and twist and ring them with three others or more to ring the water out. Later I would dream of getting rid of my father's mistress. I would do it in my dreams by ringing her neck. The spiral—I love the spiral—represents control and freedom."

MN Louise Bourgeois is fantastic she always have a very psychological point of view!

EM You have recently introduced a new material in your work, straw. Like the hammock this material has strong traditional connotations and you have worked with artisans that use a traditional working method. Please describe this.

MN This raw material that been used for thousands of years by indigenous cultures. Working with it I could live a deeply aesthetic and atavistic experience and propose a break with its traditional use in daily routines. The introduction of an artisanal technique in my work subverts its original meaning. Traditionally it is a collective cultural expression (the women work together with traditional objects) developing a new technique changes the meaning for the maker and is a way to join the traditional with the contemporary.

EM Another Brazilian artist, Helio Oiticica, has made a very well known work with hammocks. His *Cosmococa* series (1973) created in collaboration with filmmaker Neville D'Almeida consisted of cocoon-like hammocks suspended from the ceiling. While lounging in the hammocks, visitors could gaze at projected images of rock icon Jimi Hendrix and listen to a Hendrix soundtrack creating a multisensory experience designed to transform viewers into participants. The objects in his pieces are the same but his work locates itself within another set of issues. In Oiticica's work the stereotypically Brazilian was always combined with a social critique. You rather hold a fascination for the object itself. It has more to do with how the Cuban born artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) dealt with identity and background. In a statement she used the word "ancestral sap". I find that the traditional objects and techniques become a way to relate to different moments in time in your work.

MN For me the hammocks have to do exactly this, with an idea of connectedness to my origin and to a universal energy. Through the practice there is a movement that

transcends time. It's important to me to relate to this otherwise I feel I would be losing something.

EM You told me that previously, when you were still studying, you used to paint. Why did you stop, why sculpture?

MN I had already abandoned sculpture for painting. Before, as a very young girl I made a lot of objects. When I started studying I had excellent teachers that inspired me to pursue painting (among them Beatriz Milhazes) and I was also influenced by my uncle who was a painter. Later on I studied industrial design at the university and the desire to work with sculpture came back, strongly.

EM Does the material decide the work?

MN Sometimes it seduces me but sometimes it is determined by the idea, the concept.

EM Tell me about the working process. Do you work with assistants?

MN I do a lot by myself. When I have an assistant that person puts all the pearls on the nylon string following my instructions about colors and sizes. Sometimes it's impossible to have an assistant. The work is created in the process.

EM During the exhibition-making process we spoke about ideas but you were never able to say which works and how many there would be in the show except the five large pieces that we discussed from the beginning. You told me that if you have time you keep on working and every day the objects change and the result the visitor encounters at Magasin 3, I believe, is one among innumerable possible combinations?!

MN The work has no beginning and no end (laughing).